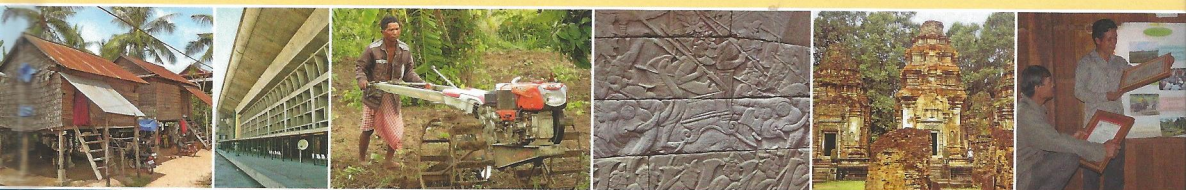


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# Humanistische Anthropologie. Ethnologische Begegnungen in einer globalisierten Welt.

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## Searching for a Home in Long-abandoned Places: The Resettlement of Late Medieval Syria

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*"Everyone from the village is returning home, as it is now safe...."*

(translation by author)

Thus reads the opening line from a letter sent to a 14<sup>th</sup>-century Muslim cleric by the name of Ibn Ḥijjī. The Damascene hailed from a family of rural clerics, and his father was born in the village of Ḥisbān in what is today the country of Jordan. Ibn Ḥijjī received the letter from another judge, who fled the village of Adhrī'āt (modern Der'a, on the Syrian-Jordanian border) on Timur's violent invasion of their lands in 803 H/1401 CE. The entire village took refuge in Ajlun castle until Timur's forces left, and then everyone, down to the last surviving man and woman, went home to rebuild the village and their community. The letter was considered important enough, for some reason, for Ibn Ḥijjī's student Ibn Qadi Shuhba to transcribe it in his own chronicle several decades later (IBN QADI SHUHBA 1997: 181).

In a body of Arab chronicles dominated by stories of departure and ruin, this rare reference to "return" reminds us that leaving a place need not be a permanent state of affairs. One of the most striking demographic phenomena of medieval Syria is the sudden reoccupation of long-abandoned places in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. What appears as a deliberate decision by multiple households, or even entire communities, to return to villages that had not been occupied for centuries, reoccupy their ruins, rebuild houses, and cultivate anew neglected fields is a fascinating chapter in the history of the Middle East that has relevance to the modern world, but has never been systematically investigated.

The following essay distills the main threads of research in a current multi-regional archaeological project by the author on the widespread "return migration" to rural and urban ruins in Greater Syria in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. Traditional scholarship on migration focuses on the push-and-pull factors that dissolve communities and lead individuals and families to leave

their homelands. This project, on the other hand, focuses on the opposite phenomenon, the understudied factors behind the “return”, the resettlement of abandoned places. Two highland sites excavated by the author – Tall Ḥisbān, on the Madaba Plains of central Jordan, and Khirbet Beit Mazmīl, outside Jerusalem – provide in this paper a window on the possible factors behind the resettlement of Late Antique/Early Islamic villages and the concomitant revival of their agricultural lands. As a well-preserved village of long-term occupation, Tall Ḥisbān vividly illustrates best the complex ways that return may have taken place, yielding data on the complex political, economic, social, and climatic factors that encouraged large groups of people to reoccupy this site after two centuries. The medieval farmstead of Khirbet Beit Mazmīl provides an important contrast in the same process; a state-run estate constructed inside the hilltop ruins became a magnet for rural growth outside Jerusalem. Together the two sites reveal the selective practices in construction and reuse that made possible the revitalization of village ruins from the thirteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

### *Khirāb*: living with ruins

In medieval parlance, the Arabic term for “ruins” (*khirāb*) tells us more about the state of occupation than the decay of the built environment. It is a term used in chronicles, travelers’ accounts, tax registers, and sales and endowment documents to describe places (usually with standing architecture) where no one lives any longer. *Khirāb* (pl.) are empty of inhabitants, but offer opportunities for future development, reuse, and reoccupation. Being empty in this way is never a final state. *Khirba* (s.) commonly forms a place-name for villages in southern Syria (modern Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian Territories), which were either seasonally occupied, developed from this into permanently occupied villages over time (“villages in the making”), or were (and remain) abandoned villages (WALKER 2020a). In endowment documents (*waqfiyyāt*) from Mamluk Cairo, *khirāb* refer to urban neighbourhoods

<sup>1</sup> Some of the ideas presented in very preliminary form in this paper were tried out first on the author’s graduate students in her WiSe 2020 webinar “Garbage, Recycling, and Living with Ruins”, which problematized the very commonplace archaeological phenomenon of refuse disposal, reuse of building material and objects, and cultural attitudes in the past towards garbage and pollution.